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ABSTRACT

School closures in Colorado's San Luis Valley were surveyed, listing the pros and cons of closing school during the potato harvest. In 1958, 12 of 31 elementary schools and 7 of 13 secondary schools ceased operation for periods up to 18 days during the potato harvest, closing schools to 4,447 students. Of these students, 904 elementary children and 736 secondary students worked in the fields. Individuals who favored strong education programs felt school closures created a negative tone among students; early school enthusiasm was lost and never regained; subject study was seriously interrupted; remedial work was retarded; pupil absenteeism was quite serious both before and after school closure periods; closures caused disruptions in extra curricular activities schedules (e.g., inadequate training in athletic programs); absenteeism lost revenue from state grants based on average daily atttendance; and incoming New Mexico children lost several weeks of schooling. From the valley economics position, school closures were favored because the potato was the valley's major economic asset; there was an urgent necessity to complete the harvest with all possible speed before weather conditions or a freeze destroyed the crop; and there was no alternative to closing some schools to induce enough workers from outside to join the labor force. (NQA)

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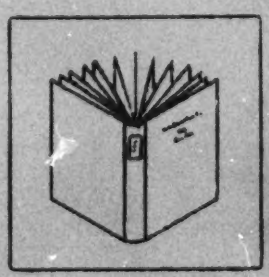
SURVEY OF SAN LUIS VALLEY SCHOOL CLOSURES

Migrant Education Research Project

Colorado State Department of Education

John H. Swenson

Acting Commissioner



Denver
1960

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SURVEY OF SAN LUIS VALLEY SCHOOL CLOSURES

Resource Report No. 4

A Survey of the Situation in Colorado's San Luis Valley that Requires the Closing of Many Schools During the Annual Potato Harvest

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Denver
1960

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SURVEY OF

SAN LUIS VALLEY SCHOOL CLOSURES

March, 1960

In 1958 there were planted in the San Luis Valley of Colorado 40,210 acres of potatoes. Of this acreage 39,980 acres were harvested. Mechanization of the harvesting process has not yet come about in the valley. The potatoes are picked by hand. Approximately 6,000 workers are needed for the task. The 10 to 12 million dollar income from potatoes is the unquestioned base of valley economy. Due to climatic conditions when the crop is ready every effort must be exerted to get the potatoes out of the ground before weather conditions or a freeze destroys them.

Herein is centered a school problem that extends over five large counties. Seven of thirteen secondary schools and twelve of thirty-one elementary schools cease operation for periods up to 18 days during the harvest period. Supporters for the schools to remain open contend that the 60,466 school days lost in 1959 cannot be made up with the same degree of successful accomplishment, as would have prevailed in an unbroken school term. Those who support school closures during the harvest contend there is no other way to follow and have enough labor available to bring the crop home.

What are the salient facts of this valley situation? This study attempts to list the facts for the benefit of all who are concerned about the problem. The study was undertaken by the Migrant Education Research Project at the request of the San Luis Valley School Council. It does not attempt to establish a solution to this problem, but rather states the situation that the problem may be seen in total perspective.

Under our system of school organization this problem is solely within the jurisdiction of the local school districts. That the matter has been approached on a regional basis jointly by many school districts is distinctly favorable to the climate that may induce solution.

In recent years the potato harvest labor force has come from four chief sources: local adults, local school children, workers brought in from neighboring New Mexico, and Indians from Arizona and New Mexico. The New Mexico labor group is composed chiefly of families. These families bring their children to enhance the total family earnings.

In 1959 the origin of the labor force was approximately:

778	Indians from Arizona and New Mexico
1659	workers from New Mexico
76	from Arizona
84	from Texas
19	from 7 other states
768	San Luis Valley
443	other parts of Colorado
2000	(est.) non-registered crews, solos, and school-age children
1690	local school children
7517	

According to estimates by the schools in the valley, 1690 local school children worked for periods up to almost four weeks. The estimated 2000 workers who were members of crews, immigrant school children and others did not pass through employment offices, but contracted directly with growers. The number is purely an estimate, and may not be accurate. The estimate of 6000 total workers is made by several officials in the valley and seems to be the consensus of opinion about the total number of workers needed. Considering that some workers may be on jobs for shorter periods and the general mobility ordinary with this type of group, the estimate of

6000 appears to be quite reliable as the top number employed at any one time during the harvest period.

Why must schools close during the potato harvest?

It is due to the fact that under the Fair Labor Standards Act, children under 16 years of age cannot be employed in farm work during school hours. The supply of over 1600 local school children does augment the labor force, but they may not be an absolute essential portion of the labor force.

By closing the schools, it is believed a goodly proportion of the 1659 workers from New Mexico are induced to come in and with them a goodly number of school-age children. It is contended that the schools do not close primarily to permit local school children to enter the labor group. Rather the schools are closed to permit the New Mexico families to come into the area. The belief is universal throughout the valley and among state labor officials that many of the New Mexico adult workers would not come into the area if not permitted to bring and work their families. The local district schools must be closed to allow the children from New Mexico to work with their parents. This New Mexico segment of workers is considered to be the heart of the entire non-local labor force. Its importance to valley economy is unquestioned.

What are the possibilities of finding labor to replace the New Mexico force?

Labor officials have investigated this possibility. There appears to be no other labor source to tap for 1700 or more workers. The migrant group from Texas which works in other parts of the state during the earlier part of the season has by this time returned south

into cotton. Some are in Colorado fruit, but comparatively few have planned valley potato work in their itineraries.

Are there more Navahoes who might be induced to come to the valley?

Investigation shows that the Indian source is on the decrease. With tribal work programs increasing on the reservation and a movement away from the reservation into urban areas the willingness to accept temporary, distant labor is steadily decreasing. A planned 1960 tribal program of work at acceptable wage scales may decrease the number of Navahoes who enter the valley during the coming 1960 season.

Are there untapped labor sources worth further investigation?

This question has been raised seriously by many. The answer appears to be that there are no other sizable groups that might be induced to come to the valley for the short period of the potato harvest.

Can mechanization of potato harvest help to answer the problem?

The answer is very probably in the affirmative. One of the valley associations has agreed to investigate this possibility. A Department of Agriculture experimental team might do much in determining the feasibility of mechanical potato pickers. The plan for this investigation definitely should be carried through to the point where decision may be made on the practicability of mechanical picking. With mechanical pickers it is probable the local adult labor force would be sufficient to handle the harvest. The problems relating to schools in all likelihood would be solved.

TABLE I
SAN LUIS VALLEY SCHOOL CLOSURES
ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

County	School District No.	School	Dates Closed	No. Days Closed	Purpose of Closure	Enrollment	Number Students Who Worked		
							Estimated	Actual	Total
Alamosa	22-U	Sangre de Cristo	9/23-10/13	14	Potato Harvest	142		52	52
	Re 11-U	Central				528			
		Boyd				406			
		East Alamosa				213			
		Waverly	9/28-30,10/7-16	11	Potato Harvest	58		8	8
		Carmel	9/28-30,10/7-16	11	Potato Harvest	68		15	15
Costilla	R-30	Sierra Grande	9/28-10/9	10	Potato Harvest	274	50		50
	1	San Luis	10/7-16	8	Potato Harvest	289	100		100
	2	Garcia				46			
	4	San Pablo	9/28-10/9	10	Potato Harvest	45	30		30
	5	Old San Acacio				17			
	6	Chama	10/5-16	10	Potato Harvest	133		80	80
	7	La Valley	9/28-10/13	10	Potato Harvest	96	35		35
	8	Jaroso				48			
	9	New San Acacio				32			
	12	Mesita				28			
	22	Los Fuertes				45			
Conejos	Re-10	Antonito				356			
	"	Conejos				113			
	"	La Isla				16			
	"	Las Mesitas				62			
	"	San Antone				47			
	"	Ortiz				35			
	1	La Jara				410			
	6	Sanford				265			
	13	Capulin	9/22-10/9	15	Potato Harvest	135	100		100
	30	Manassa				256			
Rio Grande	7	Del Norte	9/25-10/2,10/8-21	14	Potato Harvest	550	100		100
	8	Monte Vista	9/23-10/16	15	Potato Harvest	862		227	227
	Re 33-J	Sargent	9/23-10/16	18	Potato Harvest	301		107	107
Saguache	1	Saguache Consol.				230			
					Total	6108	415	489	904

TABLE II
SAN LUIS VALLEY SCHOOL CLOSURES
SECONDARY SCHOOLS

County	School District No.	School	Dates Closed	No. Days Closed	Purpose of Closure	Enrollment	Number Students Who Worked		
							Estimated	Actual	Total
Alamosa	Re 22-J	Hooper	9/24-10/13	14	Potato Harvest	64		56	56
	Re 11-J	Alamosa				493			
Costilla	Re-30	Sierra Grande	9/28-10/9	10	Potato Harvest	80	50		50
	25	Centennial Union	9/28-10/16	15	Potato Harvest	222	150		150
Conejos	Re-10	Antonito				184			
	1	La Jara				180			
	6	Sanford				320			
	30	Manassa				95			
	13	Capulin	9/22-10/9	15	Potato Harvest	40	35		35
Rio Grande	7	Del Norte	10/8-10/21	14	Potato Harvest	360	100		100
	8	Monte Vista	9/23-10/18	15	Potato Harvest	549		232	232
	Re 33-J	Sargent	9/23-10/16	18	Potato Harvest	179		163	163
Saguache	1	Saguache Consol.				65			
						2831	335	451	786
									28%

What are the implications of the school closures?

In the elementary schools of the thirty-one valley communities reported in Table 1, there was a total enrollment in the fall of 1959 of 6108 pupils. In the thirteen secondary schools, the enrollment totaled 2831. Elementary schools closed school doors to 2953 elementary children and 1494 secondary students.

Elementary enrollment in 31 communities	6108
Secondary enrollment in 13 communties	2831
TOTAL VALLEY ENROLLMENT	8939
No. pupils in closed elementary schools	2953
No. students in closed secondary schools	1494
SCHOOLS CLOSED TO	4447
No. pupils from closed Elem. schools who worked	904
Per cent of pupils from closed elem. schools who worked	30.6%
Per cent of total valley elem. population who worked	14.8%
No. students from closed secondary schools who worked	786
Per cent of students from closed secondary schools who worked	52.6%
Per cent of total valley secondary population who worked	28.0%
Per cent of total school population who worked	18.9%
Per cent of closed school population who worked	38.0%
No. school days lost during closures	60,466

How many of the children of the closed schools actually worked in the harvest? There were 904 (30.6%) of the elementary children and 786 (52.6%) secondary students who worked in the fields.

What proportion of the total valley school population did harvest work? 18.9%.

Certain pertinent questions can be raised in considering these figures. Is the work experience achieved by 38 per cent of the youth denied schooling for this period sufficient to warrant the closures? Is the economic gain to the valley growers enough to offset the schooling advantages?

Are the advantages in securing the out-of-state work force enough to warrant interruption of the schooling of so many local youth? Is consideration given to the fact that in-coming children also are kept from schooling during the period they are "on the road?"

What are the consequences of school closures on the education program in districts that close schools?

In the estimation of educators and others who tend to favor strong education programs in the valley school closures effect the school program in the following ways:

1. The school closure creates a negative tone among students. Early school enthusiasm is lost and never regained.

2. Subject study, barely started and pupils just reaching comprehension, is seriously interrupted. Regaining understanding and re-establishing a state of rapport and affirmative activity among pupils is not only impaired for some, but takes valuable time of many. Some state that the interruption affects the learning-acceptance tone of a school throughout the year.

3. Remedial work is retarded. The valley already has the problem of considerable numbers of retarded pupils. The closure distraction adds to this problem.

4. The calendar mechanics of building a 172-day school year are innumerable when up to 18 school days are removed from the standard

school calendar. Make-up classes on Saturdays even though attendance is near normal is never as adequate in accomplishment as the five-day week.

5. Beginning the school year two to three weeks earlier makes teacher employment more difficult. The problems that arise about summer college work or employment prevent many teacher applicants from seriously considering contracts with valley schools.

6. Pupil absenteeism is quite serious both before and after school closure periods.

7. The closures cause disruptions in extra curricular activities schedules including inadequate training in athletic programs.

8. Absenteeism looses revenue from state grants based on ADA.

9. The incoming New Mexico children also are affected by a loss of schooling of several weeks duration.

The cause of school closures viewed from the valley economics position has certain forceful aspects. The reasons favoring school closures may be stated thusly:

1. The major economic asset of the valley is the potato.
2. Because of the possibility of variant weather at potato harvest time and need to secure the crop before the freeze, there is an urgent necessity to complete the harvest with all possible speed.
3. A labor force of approximately six thousand workers - including children, appears necessary to complete the harvest in normal safe harvest time. To secure this full force, the workers from New Mexico (mostly family groups) are an essential part of the labor group. If the local

schools remain open, there is a strong belief that many of the New Mexico families would not come to the valley because their own children would not be permitted to work. There appears to be no substitute labor [illegible] to replace this group. The number of Indian workers is on the decline. The main segment of the seasonal migrant group has moved south into cotton or is engaged in other areas at this time. There is no alternative to closing some schools to induce enough workers from outside to join the labor force.

The effort has been made, herein to point out the facts related to school closures in the San Luis Valley, to list the pros and cons that local school districts may have a set of facts to base their considerations upon. This brief study does not attempt to present solutions to the local school districts. This is a function of each district. It does point up the desirability of experimentation with potato picking machine as a means to possible solution of the school closure problem.